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Introduction

Reason and Passion: The Parallel Worlds of Ethnography and Biography

Janet Carsten, Sophie Day, Charles Stafford

Abstract

This special issue of *Social Anthropology* places ethnography at its centre and considers how it is framed by the biographies of those involved. Probing some of the more unexpected connections that may arise between these parallel worlds, we discuss how collaborations between anthropologists and those they study inform the moral judgments and ethical practices that pervade the experience of fieldwork. What are the after-lives of such encounters? What role does the materialization of experience – for example, in houses, photographs, files and fieldnotes – play in the biographical narratives of anthropologists and of those they study? We explore these moral, material, and political resonances and set out a new agenda for the biographical as part of the anthropological project.

Key words: Reason, Passion, Ethnography, Biography, Fieldwork

Introduction

Reason and Passion: The Parallel Worlds of Ethnography and Biography

Two people in early middle age sit hunched together in a car in 2013, tensely examining a photocopied typescript from decades earlier. Robert and Grit have been friends for almost twenty years. The car is parked outside a local State Security (Stasi) Records Agency in Thuringia, part of the former GDR (East Germany), and the photocopy is an excerpt from Robert's Stasi file. He has an appointment with a member of staff in order to try to obtain an explanation of the documents. The date on the file seems to be that on which he was entered in the database of the state security apparatus. But it has another significance too for Robert – it was also the date of his parents' divorce. An unspoken question hangs in the air: had his mother, a staunch Party member, asked the Stasi to monitor him in his adolescence?

Entanglements of familial and political life, and the layers of secrecy in which they may be shrouded, are encapsulated in this moment. They are thickened by the passage of time since the events recorded in the documents took place, and by the relation between the two long-standing friends. Grit is an anthropologist carrying out doctoral fieldwork on secular coming of age rituals (Jugendweihe) in Thuringia. She is also a native Thuringian, and herself participated in the events of 1989 which culminated in the collapse of the GDR. And so, an act of friendship – accompanying Robert to discover what he could about his Stasi file – also raises for her troubling issues about the implications of observation and monitoring. Where are the lines to be drawn between illicit spying, as carried out by the Stasi, and the everyday observational work of an anthropologist? The ethics of disclosure and trust, issues with which every anthropologist has to grapple during the course of fieldwork, are heightened here by the political and familial history that the file (a material trace of the past) encompasses, and by the long-standing friendship between Grit and Robert.

How do the worlds of anthropologists and of those they meet in the course of fieldwork come together, and over what time span? To what extent is the 'reasoned' practice of ethnography shaped by (explicit or implicit) convergences in our life stories and by the emotional resonances these set in train? How do such convergences relate to the – sometimes awkward – balancing act we are meant to strike between anthropology as an exercise in human empathy and anthropology as an exercise in cultural critique? This special issue of *Social Anthropology* places ethnography at its centre and considers how it is framed by the biographies of those involved. Probing some of the more

unexpected connections that may arise between these parallel worlds, we are interested in how collaborations between anthropologists and those they study inform the moral judgments and ethical practices that pervade the experience of fieldwork. What are the after-lives of such encounters? What role does the materialization of experience – for example, in houses, photographs, files and fieldnotes – play in the biographical narratives of anthropologists and of those they study? We explore these moral, material, and political resonances and set out a new agenda for the biographical as part of the anthropological project.

Before turning to the topics of biography, transmission, and morality briefly in turn, a word about our title and also about the style and approach of the articles in this collection. ‘Reason and passion’ – terms proposed in writings of the Scottish Enlightenment (see Weston this volume)¹ – suggest a dichotomy in ways of understanding the world. ‘Ethnography and biography’ suggests another dichotomy. Each term conventionally signifies different modes of engagement. Reason, apparently like ethnography, indicates some degree of distance and detachment. Passion, perhaps like biography, suggests closeness and strong emotional commitment – the very opposite of ‘cool’ reason. But the point of this collection is in fact to overturn such assumptions and show that both are false dichotomies. As our opening vignette suggests and as the articles in this volume collectively demonstrate, the moral judgments that pervade biography and ethnography are simultaneously reasoned and emotional, private and political. The distance implied by ethnography actually rests on emotional and moral attachments; biographies are intrinsically political in their composition and transmission – including through processes of kinship (Carsten 2007). Ethnography and biography, which seemingly occur in different registers, are always based in communities of practice and conventions of transmission, and thus entail relations of power. In calling for attention to the importance of biography in anthropology, we therefore also highlight its political salience, and draw parallels between different modes of transmission and the moral engagements on which they rest. As for the approach and style of the articles: our authors were explicitly asked to adopt a self-reflexive tone in their contributions – and thus, potentially, to bring in material that might otherwise be edited out of published work (or, at least, hidden away in footnotes and acknowledgements). From our point of view, this relatively personal perspective on the experience of being an anthropologist was a key element in this project. And yet – as should be obvious – we seek to combine this autobiographical slant with rigorous ethnography as well as a

¹ The papers in this special issue were originally presented as a panel at the ASA Decennial Conference on ‘Anthropology and Enlightenment’ held in Edinburgh in May 2014 along with contributions from Karin Barber and Veena Das which unfortunately could not be included here.

serious engagement with social science theory.

Biography

The interplay of lives before, during and after fieldwork has long been a matter of anthropological interest (for overviews, see the contributions below by Weston and Beatty). Taken together, our articles reveal biography to be integral to ethnography, and vice versa. Our approach is novel in treating biography as part of the process of ethnography rather than separate from or prior to it. We show this to be the case, first, through the connections between different biographies (including but not only the anthropologist's), describing how they are related to each other and contested in the intimate connections forged in fieldwork. Second, through historicising ethnography by producing less synchronic and thus less implicitly functional accounts, we argue that this 'scale' of smaller histories is both as important as larger ones and as intrinsically political. Biographies (and the morality and relationships in which they are embedded) are integral to what is transmitted as well as to more official, larger-scale histories or descriptions of a given social field.

Anthropologists have illuminated the varied genres in which people tell stories, rendering the conventions of the global north and of elites less natural or taken for granted (Day 2007). A life may be counted or accounted for in a series of titles or goods, for example, rather than narrated in words, and such accounts may be marks of privilege. As Andrew Beatty describes, only high-ranking chiefs on the island of Nias in Indonesia have a narratable career in the form of quantities of pork and gold, which must be settled before death. In east Java, however, Beatty discovers an impersonal 'anti-biography' where the self is to be shed through a series of metamorphoses among adepts of Javanese mysticism. A third genre is glimpsed in this Javanese location among those who cannot speak, 'who never attained the right to possess' a life story because of state violence. 'Non-persons', they nevertheless hold the welfare of the village in their hands as custodians of the guardian spirit.

And yet, it can be argued that sustained attention to the biographical, which implies a kind of methodological individualism, detracts from a wider ethnographic appreciation of the environment in which biography is but one element (see Holland and Lave 2001). Such criticism has been levelled at the reflexive turn in anthropology where an 'author's' sensibilities provided both a way into and a measure of the ethnography that was generated, whether in the collection of data or the composition of texts. This reflexive turn can be considered a variant of earlier feminist standpoint theory, which demonstrated how the ethnographer's position enabled or rendered invisible a view

from the margins, from below or the previously overlooked. To adopt a standpoint also positions the ethnographer across a social environment (Haraway 1988², Scholte 1999, Jackson 2013).

In the context of today's rapidly shifting geopolitical worlds, we suggest that a differently construed biographical turn can provide a lens onto changing situations. Consider Louise Bourgeois' many biographical works. Aged 85, for example, she began to scour her closets for the clothes and textiles that she had worn, collected and stored over a lifetime, and used them to make sculpture and 'fabric drawings'. She wrote, "You can retell your life ... by the shape, weight, colour and smell of those clothes in your closet. They are like the weather, the ocean, changing all the time." (cited in Heide Education, 2012). We consider interactions between people, and with material objects, across the times and places that they connect without assuming a specifically close or distant 'focus' on the interaction or making use of any optical metaphor (see Weston this volume), and without privileging continuity over rupture.

It is insufficient, we suggest, to acknowledge that we bring our biographies to field encounters and reconstruct them afterwards, as do our interlocutors, or to acknowledge the biographical give and take that shapes such encounters. What of those half-glimpsed reminders from another's mother or father (Stafford this volume), our inchoate responses to a teapot presented as a rare treasure only to be told that it is commonplace (Day this volume)? Such fragments and traces, once-forgotten but now recalled experiences in the form of an object or word, and evocations through a glance, a sudden stiffening of the body or a silence are as much the stuff of ethnography as of biography and imbricated in the everyday. Without attunement to cues such as these, ethnographic methodologies of observation, documentation and analysis would not be feasible or even imaginable.

The papers in this collection place biography and ethnography on an equal and interconnected footing: parallel worlds that are intertwined along several dimensions and mutually illuminating; also parallax – indicating an illusory convergence that nonetheless, as it is constantly deferred, directs attention to something yet to be grasped (Weston, Goddard, this volume). Weston, Stafford and other contributors explore questions of ethnographic sympathy, variously predicating a passionate reason and a reasoned passion as much as (potential) betrayal that raise questions about who is enabled to act, speak or write in relation to whom. How can we bring an ethnographic sensitivity to biographies that negotiate the shifting contours of public and private, enabling some

² Haraway (1988: 190) writes, 'feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge'.

things to be reported but not others? As biographies ‘shove up’ against each other, in Weston’s words, they constitute a sense of both the here and now, and of the longer term. Over the long-term fieldwork that is emphasised in this collection (notably, in Sedgwick’s account of research with Japanese overseas corporate ‘salarymen’), contributors probe the shape of an expanded, textured and composite sense of the coeval that continues after fieldwork, and in the making of histories as well as ethnographies.

Transmission

As we learn from the Argentinian case considered by Victoria Goddard, forgotten or hidden biographies elicit practices of care that recover memories of lives lost in times of crisis. Contentious biographies, in the words of one contributor, constitute a sense of historicity that allows us to understand the overlapping formation of gender and generation, kinship and the state. Biographical memories, as this collection shows, may be hidden, silenced, approached with ambivalence, or actively blocked (see also Weller 2017).

Remembering is a political act and an act of care (Antze and Lambek 1996: Lambek 1996), as Goddard demonstrates in her account of the virtually forgotten murder of Norma Penjerek who, in the words of one woman, ‘was the first disappeared’. This was also the time of Eichmann in Argentina. Remembering (and not significantly the convenient closure of memorialising) becomes, for the Mothers and for Argentina, a new practice of protest that explicitly places the family in view of the state, and tells histories of family that unfold within state repression and violence. Biographical and ethnographic fragments move between public and private in this new historicity and make the political “memorable”, becoming the stuff of Arendtian stories (citing Kateb 2005: 13) that, as they are told, heard, and circulated bring the political into being. And this, in Arendt’s view, also defines the political in terms of the possibility of new beginnings.

Distance (in space, time or some other dimension) in several of our contributions implies little of the objectivity conventionally associated with understanding earlier experiences in the field close up. To the contrary, it implies continuing involvement, sympathy and connections which are themselves mobile, transported into lecture halls and texts, built into houses or objects, woven into textiles and gestures. As Kath Weston notes in her history of sympathy from the enlightenment to anthropological approaches to ‘other’ forms of magic, ‘Sympathetic magic relies for its effects upon associations produced through *contiguity*: a spatial configuration that establishes a potent relationship between things, either through an initial direct contact or by bringing them into rough

proximity. Once established, this relationship persists, even at a remove, allowing each to continue to affect the other from afar' (p.xx). In Weston's hands, sympathy can enable a nimble, even provocative, engagement across the inevitably incommensurable experiences that Victoria Goddard discusses.

Goddard's discomfort with her own sense of identification with childhood peers and neighbouring generations prompts a return to the historical period of her childhood via Arendt's (1979) defense of 'reason' in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Reason here is analogous to Weston's sympathy insofar as it corrects a tendency to identify, which can only suppress the 'plurality' of social life and, in particular, evidence of where power is and what it does. 'All these demand a story, one that can be apprehended, and make these experiences matter.' (below p. xx)

Our collection thus raises questions about the transmission of biography, memories, and experience between generations (see Boyarin 1994; Carsten 2007).³ In the contexts considered here, contributors ask how transmission is enabled, for whom and to what ends. In what ways is the biographical silently embedded or embodied? While it is conventional to assume the straightforward occurrence and value of passing on and receiving biographical experience - a flow of information - our essays (particularly those of Stafford, Carsten, and Goddard) reveal crucial stoppages. Perhaps coincidentally, fathers here seem especially prone to curtail or deflect discussion of the past. When and how do fathers – or mothers – enable or block the transmission of memories, and how do they shape the after-lives of encounters in the field, including the objects, photographs and houses that carry their traces (Hoskins 1998)?

Several of the contributions to this issue suggest the potency and evocative capacities of material objects in recalling past experiences and their transmission to others. This is captured viscerally in the charged atmosphere generated by the sight of a photocopied typescript of a file from a previous political era in our opening vignette. Materiality is present too in the dollar bills and cups of coffee on the table of an Oklahoma diner, described by Stafford, that betoken a history of conviviality. And it is there in digital form in the anxious texts sent home by Mitch Sedgwick's Japanese research participants on the US Mexican border in the period immediately following the earthquake

³ 'Because history is made in person, registered in intimate identities as well as institutions, there is every reason to expect that age cuts across people's experiences and creates intergenerational differences.' (Holland and Lave 2001: 17; see also Warren (2001) in this collection on the significance of generational differences for history in person).

and tsunami of 2011. The importance of inherited valuables to the transmission of memories is at the forefront of Sophie Day's account of an experiment with a photo book in Ladakh in which pictures of objects from lost houses apparently have the potential to bridge gaps of transmission. But this example, like that of the missing houses in Berlin described in Janet Carsten's explicitly autobiographical account, also shows that such possibilities are uncertain. Information has to be sought, and material objects may or may not allow 'safe' pathways along which to navigate painful recuperation of the past. Researchers - whether they are ethnographers or would-be memoirists - may find avenues of communication blocked rather than made accessible.

The obscured or vanished houses and objects considered by Day and Carsten - in one case minority Muslim houses in Ladakh, in the other Jewish houses in Berlin - make explicit the political nature of acts of transmission or their absence. Carsten and Day write of houses in the Malay world and in Ladakh as 'moral persons' that connect the past to the present and the family to the state (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Lévi-Strauss 1983). In more muted forms, repeated consumption of family meals or accumulated experiences of living together in one house (which anthropologists are accustomed to see as 'non-political' and everyday kinship) can also be seen as acts of materialisation. House furnishings, clothing, food, heirlooms, photographs, and genealogies may form part of the 'shared substance' that brings relatives together over time and space (see Bahloul 1996; Carsten 1997; 2011; in press; Trautmann, Mitani, and Feeley-Harnik 2011). Not surprisingly perhaps, such material forms, conjuring a sense of contiguity, are particularly redolent with the emotional power of the memories they embody.

The papers collected here make explicit a further point in relation to the way materials may enable or amplify the transmission of biographies. In several cases, we can observe not only how objects animate memories within a specific cultural context, but also how they afford unexpected (and often implicit) possibilities for the intersection of biographies during the course of fieldwork. The resonances evoked by particular experiences - of mealtimes inside a Malay house in the case of Carsten, family cooking utensils in the case of Day - are suggestive for the ethnographer partly because their own earlier biographies have made them receptive to just such encounters. These compatibilities, which often pass unarticulated during fieldwork and in the subsequent process of writing, are fundamental to the anthropological endeavour. The implicit nature of such 'susceptibilities of recognition' suggests that it will be productive to explore further the role of biography in ethnography. But as Carsten's contribution signals, and as we sense too in the accounts from Goddard, Sedgwick, Stafford and Wesser, ethnographic insights can be equally

illuminating in the process of composing a previously obscured biography – that of the anthropologist. Transmissions, we argue, may be absent or unnoticed, contested or controversial; in the contributions here, we see that they are actively produced, and this is a shared endeavour requiring moral calibration and negotiation over time.

Morality

Questions of moral and ethical practice thus pervade ethnography as surely as they pervade ‘ordinary’ human life. Such questions are seen at the micro level of human encounters in passing linguistic exchanges – where shades of meaning matter greatly – and equally in implicit understandings that are shared across communities without a word being spoken (see Das 2012, Keane 2015, Laidlaw 2013, Lambek 2010, Stafford 2013). Questions of moral and ethical practice impinge heavily on both our professional *and* our personal biographies, as well as on those of the people we study. How could it be otherwise? On the one hand, many if not most of the topics we explore via fieldwork – for example, what it means to live and die with AIDS (Weston), why Japanese corporations are viewed as kinship-like institutions (Sedgwick), how the traumas of Argentina’s past are recuperated and/or silenced (Goddard), how rural Oklahomans conceive their relationship to the common good and thus to the state (Stafford) – only make sense in relation to the moral and ethical frameworks of our interlocutors. Indeed, what people often spontaneously share with anthropologists is not their detached or neutral view of things (that could be rather boring, in any case) but rather their explicitly normative or *moral* view, what they think is good or bad in a given state of affairs.

On the other hand, the experience of fieldwork is itself famously complicated in ethical terms, sometimes fraught. This is seen, for instance, in Weston’s account of a terminally ill research subject whose rage was directed at her, the observant anthropologist, and in Wesser’s account of those tense moments shared with Robert, her long-standing friend, now drawn into her research. Interestingly, Michael Lambek notes that whereas formal ethical protocols governing ethnographic research ‘generally presume a rather thin and distant relationship’ between anthropologists and those they study, the truth is that – and here again we see the convergence of ethnography and biography – ‘the central problem of ethnographic ethics concerns subjects with whom we become very (too?) close’ (Lambek 2015:274). Of course, many research subjects will happily (even enthusiastically) share their life experiences with anthropologists. But collecting these narratives, and perhaps especially reporting them, can still be very sensitive, for example, when they touch on difficult or tragic – and thus painful – circumstances from the recent past. As Stafford mentions in

his article, Pierre Bourdieu's father helped him carry out highly sensitive interviews with men who had been left behind in rural Béarn and who were destined never to marry; whereas Stafford's own father, by contrast, was at least implicitly opposed to the very idea of extracting life stories from rural Oklahomans, given how painful this might turn out to be in some cases. Of course, one answer to an ethical critique of this kind is that precisely by extended engagement in the lives of others, in other words, via the entangling of biographies, we take a place in their moral worlds (and vice versa), thus making ethnography a collaborative practice. This is illustrated, for instance, in Sophie Day's interactions with her friend Deen over the 'storyboard' of images she had pulled together for him, and which drew on their long association, and on what he had (already) told her of his past. (A striking ethnographic detail is that when she first hands him the photobook he says "Oh my god" and puts it away; they only discuss it together some time later, after it has started to circulate more widely among the family.)

How should we balance the professional duty to be sensitive with the professional duty to learn via 'sympathetic' long-term ethnography? And what is the relationship between observing and recording a way of life and taking a normative stance with regard to some or all of it? There are no simple answers to these questions. Indeed, they relate back to an enduring tension across the social sciences (with their Enlightenment-derived epistemologies) between analysis and critique as our – not always easily commensurable – goals. Moreover, this tension takes on a special complexity, at least for anthropologists, in cases where our own stories intersect closely with those of our informants – often but not always thanks to a shared background in a given society at a particular moment in time; and where the boundary between the personal and the political is blurred. How do convergences of this kind transform the activity of making, or refraining from making, moral judgements as fieldwork proceeds? As Westermarck long ago observed, moral judgements rest heavily on, indeed ultimately derive from, emotional reactions: they are intrinsically emotional phenomena (Westermarck 1906).

So how do the emotional trajectories in our biographies impinge on our work as ethnographers, and how does the emotional work of ethnography impinge on our own biographies? As Wesser comments, the end of the GDR – and with it the security regime that had spied on her friend Robert – was, for her, both a liberation and a loss: the regime was at least 'ours', there was (and is) some kind of substantive emotional attachment. On a different register, Stafford describes carrying out research in the rural American heartland, where his parents grew up. Some of the very likeable people he knows there hold views that, for him, are objectionable. Where should his sympathy

and/or detachment as a professional anthropologist start and end? The answer is complicated by the fact that here, as for Wesser, to conduct ethnography is also to conduct an archaeology of the self and of the political environment in which the self has been constituted. Are ‘my’ people bad? If so, where does that leave me? In considering similar issues of judgement in the context of her research in Argentina, Goddard draws on Arendt’s discussion of how we might seek to understand evil. For Arendt too, as she notes, emotions are at the heart of moral judgement but in a complex way: both creating the potential for sympathy/empathy with others, not least as a route to understanding, and also creating dangers for political projects.

Conclusion

If, as our collection shows, the biographical sense is integral to ethnography, what is the virtue of making this explicit? In repudiating a false dichotomy between ethnography and biography, the articles in this issue highlight the political, emotional and moral commitments of each, and show their mutual entanglements. Although the contributions are framed primarily on a small-scale and personal level, they illuminate the political import of ‘private’ lives and biographical transmission. By attending to the centrality of a biographically-forged receptiveness to particular aspects of experience in ethnographic practice, we resist the pervasive compartmentalising of passion and reason, of private and political acts. While apparently occurring on different scales and anchored in different conventions, biography and ethnography are mutually enmeshed – partly through the long-term engagements of fieldwork.

But as Lambek (2015) argues, the ethical dilemmas and ambiguities of fieldwork arise partly from ‘the fact that, by its very definition, fieldwork is limited in time and space’ (2015: 277). Thus, he suggests, departure from the field constitutes a kind of abandonment and betrayal - with consequent implications in terms of framing or ‘containing’ an ethnographer’s fieldwork life (Lambek uses a psychoanalytic analogy of dissociation (2015: 278)). Making the biographical explicit thus highlights what acts of transmission (whether biographical, ethnographic or both simultaneously) have in common: that they are morally and politically constituted. The after-lives of the ethnographic and biographical encounters considered here bear out Arendt’s (2000) view that stories enrol participants – not least, professional anthropologists – in new moral and political trajectories.

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